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ABSTRACT

The paper describes a "mini-assessment" designed to help teachers understand the nature and extent of students' learning problems. A distinction is made between children with reading problems due to neurological differences and those with problems due to emotional, educational, or cultural factors. The importance of identifying and referring the child with true learning disabilities (LD) is emphasized. Characteristics of LD children are briefly reviewed, and a 10-minute pre-referral identification instrument is described. The task uses classroom materials to assess paragraph reading, consonants, vowels, and spelling. A sample case study illustrates the use of the miniassessment in determining future referral and in aiding professional communication about the student. (CL)

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MINI-ASSESSMENT: A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO CLASSROOM IDENTIFICATION OF LEARNING DISABLED READERS

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April 1984 Sharon Simpson Rhodes

Do I have a learning disabled reader in my class? Should I make a referral for a special education evaluation? How should this child be instructed between the time I make the referral and the assessment results are available? These are the kinds of questions that teachers in all schools ask themselves, especially in the intermediate grades, when the developmental range of children's abilities has begun to narrow, and a few children are still lagging far behind.

This article will present a classroom method by which a teacher can answer those questions, and make a better decision about whether to refer a child for an evaluation of learning disabilities.

Two types of readers

Not all children with reading problems are learning disabled. Children with severe reading difficulties, i.e. more than a two year delay, can be divided into two categories: primary remedial readers, who have reading disorders as a result of learning disability, and secondary remedial readers, who have difficulties for other reasons (Kaluger and Kolson, 1978).

The secondary remedial reader is that child whose reading problems are caused by elements other than those related to his or her central learning system. These problems may be emotional, educational, cultural, and are often found in combination. A broad, simplified generalization is that the secondary remedial reader lacks skills. He may have had poor instruction, poor attendance, lowered motivation, cultural differences, or a host of other

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factors interacting with each other and impinging upon his acquisition of basic reading skills. The integrity of the learning mechanism in a secondary remedial reader is intact, however.

The primary, or learning disabled reader, unlike other poor readers, suffers from particular conceptual, perceptual and cognitive difficulties when faced with the reading task in ADDITION to potentially having all the emotional, attendance, cultural and educational problems of the secondary remedial reader. The primary child has some learning difference that is presumed to be neurological, and which interferes with his or her ability to acquire and maintain skills, in the presence of normal intelligence. In short, the primary remedial reader has not learned basic skills because of some internal difference that, even under the best of educational circumstances, interferes with normal reading development. Unfortunately, many children having difficulty learning to read have not had the best of educational circumstances offered to them. And, all too often, they develop coping strategies such as acting out, truancy, clowning and feigning incompetence that further impede the acquisition of basic skills in the early years. The interaction of the secondary behavioral problems with the already existing primary neurological differences creates a learner who has very poor skill development, poor learning habits PLUS an inability to process information easily and retain it. Without insightful identification and (ultimately evaluation procedures), it will be difficult to distinguish one learner from another. It is crucial that we do so, however, because the therapeutic placement and/or treatment, whether in classroom, resource room or clinic, will differ for each type of learner. Learning disabled readers require a highly structured program, with a limited number of associations taught at one time. The program must require

mastery of each learned letter or sound, and proceed in such a way as to minimize the practicing of mistakes (Bryant, 1978). Secondary remedial readers will also need individualized instruction and carefully planned lessons, but the truancy, language difference or other factor involved in the development of the problem must also be addressed, and will go far in correcting the reading difficulty when appropriate instruction is provided (Kaluger & Kolson, 1978). The classroom teacher can not simply refer ALL problem readers for a full evaluation to discover whether the reading problem is primary or secondary, because evaluations are costly, both in dollars and emotional distress to the parents and child. It also takes time. Teachers need to have some answers today.

If only those we truly suspect of learning disability are to be referred, then a better understanding of the characteristic behaviors a primary, (learning disabled) reader displays in the classroom is necessary.

In reporting on his investigation of dyslexia, another term for primary remedial reading problems, supported by the Public Health Service and Association for the Aid of Crippled Children, N. Dale Bryant (1978) cited specific behaviors of primary remedial readers which can be observed in their reading performance, and which may be helpful in identification and diagnosis. These include:

1. Reading haltingly, with simple errors often made.

2. Ability to recognize a word in one sentence and not know it in the next.

3. Guessing at words based on initial letter, length, insufficient cues.

4. Typically knowing names of letters and the sounds of most consonants, but confused when giving vowel sounds--especially within a word.

5. Reading skills and errors very similar to those of the young reader. Often learns words at higher grade levels, but still makes errors like a beginning reader--especially on function words.

6. Inefficient in associating sound with abstract visual symbols.

7. Appears to have poor perception of details within a complex and abstract whole (word).

(Bryant, 1978)

In addition to the above, several other characteristics, compiled from clinical and classroom experience, can be added to the list.

8. Difficulty in writing, but somewhat better facility in copying letters (problems in revisualization of letters and words).

9. An ability to produce letter combinations on a dictation task that bear no resemblence to English patterns or constructions.

10. An ability to forget a lesson learned to the 100% level so completely that he/she may not even recall that the material was studied!

Making the Identification of a Primary Remedial Reader in Your Classroom

As a result of daily contact and monitoring, the classroom teacher is in an excellent position to identify the child who should be referred for an evaluation. The fact that the teacher is considering making such a referral indicates that the child is having great difficulty in the classroom; indeed he/she must be at least two years behind to be considered "remedial." (Kaluger and Kolson, 1978) Because the child may be having behavioral problems as well as reading difficulties, the teacher must determine if the child has a learning difference that warrants a full special educational evaluation. When considering such an evaluation, keep in mind that to be a primary remedial reader the child must:

have normal or better I.Q. Slow learners often have reading problems that are not considered "primary."

have been experiencing problems right from the beginning of his school career. Learning differences typically appear when formal school starts.

be able to understand classroom information at a much higher level than he can read.

have had adequate opportunity to learn.

have difficulty generalizing learned skills to new reading material.

get confused rather easily when learning reading skills.

appear to understand a lesson, only to forget it (sometimes totally) in a day or so.

When most of the above describe your student, it is appropriate for you to consider a special education evaluation request. To confirm your decision to request an evaluation, the ten minute pre-referral identification instrument which follows may be helpful. All that is needed are some simple tools, which you may already have on hand. The materials are:

* A sheet of paper with all the consonants typed in primary letters approximately one inch apart.

* A page with the 5 vowels in isolation and three, three-letter words for each vowel, making sure the initial consonant is the same for each list.

a	e	i	o	u
rid	did	let	nab	bet
red	dab	lab	not	bun
rug	don	lob	nip	but

* Three sample paragraphs from the reader in which he/she is currently placed; one from the beginning, middle and end, each at least fifty words long. Child reads these from the book.

* Five spelling words from the grade level list, or from any spelling text used for the grade. Words should be from the middle of the book.

NOTE: If the school has a Brigance Comprehensive Inventory, or Inventory of Basic Skills, both published by Curriculum Associates, 5 Esquire Road,

N. Billerica, Mass., it can be used instead of the teacher made pages.

Some teachers will be concerned that there are no samples of reading comprehension included in this mini-assessment. Obviously, reading comprehension is very important to the evaluation of reading disabilities. This pre-referral identification procedure, however, is not an evaluation. It is a quick look, taken in the presence of a number of symptoms, which will help the teacher determine if the problem is poor skills in reading, or poor learning skills FOR reading. Most primary remedial readers in the elementary school are "stuck" at reading levels below third grade, therefore this assessment focuses on the acquired association and decoding skills that such readers usually lack.

Procedure

Ask the child to read the first paragraph. Do not correct him or interrupt. On your own copy, indicate what he says as he reads. An easy way to do that is simply to mark through letters or words not said, and write on top of the word what was said, or added. If the child has few errors, give him the next paragraph and do the same thing. If he is having difficulty, stop after the first one, or after five minutes total.

Next ask the child to read the consonants. Then point to a consonant and ask for the sound it makes. (Omit q and x). Be sure to ask for both sounds of g and c. Now give the student the sound and ask him to point to the consonant.

Now, repeat the procedure with the vowels, first asking the child to read each vowel. Do not ask him for the sound each makes however. Ask him to read each column of words. Note the ease or difficulty the child has

switching from one short sound to the next, and whether he starts confusing initial consonant sounds in the words. When he has finished reading the words, explain that you will say one word from each of the five columns, and he must point to it as quickly as he can.

Finally, have the child write the five spelling words. Do not let the child be concerned about errors, your goal is to make this a difficult task; however, do not let the child work on any word more than thirty seconds.

Total testing time: 10 minutes.

Reviewing Results

Fill out the following checklist. Check those characteristics observed.

Paragraph reading

1. Student read haltingly, missing simple words and reading harder ones _____

2. Student read at least two words in sentences that he missed later on in his reading _____

3. When student did not know a word the guess was based on initial letter, word length or other insufficient clue, rather than on the context _____

Consonants

4. Student could read fewer than 15 of the consonants _____

5. Student knew less than 15 consonant sounds _____

6. Student did not know alternate consonant sounds for g and c _____

Vowels

7. Student confused the vowel sounds and was typically correcting himself or knew he was wrong _____

8. Had difficulty decoding the three-letter words _____

9. Had difficulty finding the word teacher called from each list _____

10. Seemed to get tongue-tied or rubbed eyes _____

11. Confused initial consonants within the same column _____

12. Could not easily discriminate the short vowel sounds in words _____

Spelling words

13. Child took almost full 30 seconds to write each word _____

14. Child's spelling mistakes were not "phonic" _____

15. Child put letters together that were not possible in English; i.e. fphm, blc, tm _____

Scoring

Each of the items scores 1 point. A child who scores over 10 should be considered for a referral to special education.

Sample case study

Steve, fourth grade, age 9, has been having difficulty in reading since kindergarten. He has fallen further and further behind, despite the best efforts of his teachers and of Steve himself. Now, in the fourth grade, his teacher has him in a 2-1 reader, and his progress is slow. He seems to forget everything he learns within a short time; if he learns a new word today he will probably not recognize it tomorrow, or from a source other than the text-book. It seems to take Steve many, many exposures to a word before he knows it. His sight word vocabulary is inadequate. Phonic skills are even less developed. He can recognize all the letters by name, but doesn't associate all the sounds with the letters; vowels utterly confuse him. He was given the mini-assessment, with the following results.

Paragraphs

(Beginning of book)

Buttons was not in the closet. Buttons was not under the bed-not in the hall-not in the attic. dk (doesn't know)

very slow and word-by-word

At last Nell saw Buttons. "Ha, ha," said Nell. "Is Buttons a doll?"

"Pick him up," said Nick. "Buttons is not a doll." ball

Nell and Nick were glad. Buttons was not lost after all. little at

(Middle of book)

dk on stop fat said won't
~~Once~~, in the spring of the ~~year~~, the ~~wicked~~ fox smiled at his wife and said, "Put this the big black pot on the fire. This time I am going to catch Little Red Hen and bring her home. We will have her for dinner."

"Here is a sack," said Old Mother Fox.

(From: Basic Reading, Book E, Lippincott Company, Philadelphia, 1975)

End of book paragraph not given, as student had used up five minutes and was frustrated. Very slow on second paragraph. Read word-by-word. Guessed at words.

Consonants

Knew all by name. Knew sounds for all the consonants except g (hard sound only), c (hard sound only), w, y, z.

b	c	d	f	g	h
j	k	l	m	n	p
q	r	s	t	v	~~w~~
x	~~y~~	z			

Vowels

Was able to read each vowel name correctly.

	a	e	i	o	u
raid rid	did	let	dk ~~nab~~	bet	
red	bad dab	dk ~~tab~~	not	bus bun	corrected himself
rug	dad don	dk ~~ob~~	dk ~~nip~~	boy but	

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Missed 8 of words on initial trial, corrected himself on 3. Appeared very confused. Needed to keep his finger on the words to read each column. Said bad for dab in second column; dad for dab on second try. Could point to the words red, did, let, bet and not when asked, but slowly, and deliberately. Was not positive he was pointing to the right one.

Spelling

Words given:	written:
circle	
oatmeal	
pinch	
vanish	
escape	

(Words taken from Basic Goals in Spelling, Book 4, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1980)

Steve was very slow and had difficulty forming the words. His errors did not approximate English spellings. Handwriting is poor.

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Checklist

Paragraph reading

1. Student read haltingly, missing simple words and reading harder ones ✓

2. Student read at least two words in sentences that he missed later on in his reading ✓

3. When student did not know a word the guess was based on initial letter, word length or other insufficient clue, rather than on the context ✓

Consonants

4. Student could read fewer than 15 of the consonants ___

5. Student knew less than 15 consonant sounds ___

6. Student did not know alternate consonant sounds for g and c ✓

Vowels

7. Student confused the vowel sounds and was typically correcting himself or knew he was wrong ✓

8. Had difficulty decoding the three-letter words ✓

9. Had difficulty finding the word teacher called from each list ✓

10. Seemed to get tongue-tied or rubbed eyes ✓

11. Confused initial consonants within the same column ✓

12. Could not easily discriminate the short vowel sounds in words ✓

Spelling words

13. Child took almost full 30 seconds to write each word ✓

14. Child's spelling mistakes were not "phonic" ✓

15. Child put letters together that were not possible in English; i.e. fphm, blc, tm ✓

score:

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Steve had 13 of the 15 indicators, and his teacher would be wise to make a special education referral for him. She would, of course, include all of this information along with the referral form, which would give the screening committee a very good idea about the kinds of problems Steve is having in reading. This classroom information will also help the evaluator determine the instruments that would best uncover his learning problems. Ultimately, a program will be planned for him that meets his learning strengths and weaknesses. In the interim, however, Steve will still be in the teacher's classroom, needing assistance every day. How can the mini-assessment give the teacher some direction?

The teacher knew before this assessment that Steve was really struggling to learn, and that he was taking a long time to master basic skills. She now knows that:

1. he specifically doesn't know alternative sounds for c and g; doesn't know w, y and z sounds in isolation
2. he needs help in short vowel discrimination
3. he must learn a spelling strategy and some rules
4. he must develop the habit of reading in phrases so that his reading will be smoother and more meaningful.

This information should be very helpful in planning instruction for this child immediately, so that instruction during the period between referral and evaluation will be maximized. In addition, having this information makes communication with the resource teacher more productive, as there are now specific issues, like spelling strategies, that can be discussed prior to the evaluation.

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Conclusions

Teachers need a data-base upon which to make decisions about if and when to refer students, and what to do in their classrooms before the evaluation takes place. Use of this mini-assessment enables teachers to develop that data-base quickly and efficiently, without extensive equipment or materials. It will give the teacher an answer to the question of when to refer, and if the referral should be made. It will give direction about needed instruction before a formal evaluation is completed.

This mini-assessment is not designed to replace a full evaluation if one is indicated, rather its best use is for the teacher's understanding of the extent of the learning problem, and as a professional communication aid; it will augment any referral form and provide the means for more thoughtful referrals to special education.

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